

REMARKS  
ON  
THE MUSTARD TREE  
OF THE  
NEW TESTAMENT.



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PHYTOLACCA DODECANDRA.

*The Mustard Tree of the New Testament.*



REMARKS

ON THE

MUSTARD TREE

MENTIONED IN THE

NEW TESTAMENT.

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TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE AND RIGHT REVEREND

**WILLIAM HOWLEY, D.D. F.R.S. F.A.S.**

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## P R E F A C E.

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FINDING that a brief sketch of the subject of this Pamphlet, drawn up only for private circulation, has been made public in a state little fitted for critical examination, the Author is induced to publish the following Remarks, which he hopes will explain the passages alluded to in the Gospel by St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, in reference to a grain of Mustard Seed becoming a Tree. This figurative expression is a beautiful emblem of the growth of faith; and it

## PREFACE.

is desirable to reconcile to the minds of inquirers, the apparent paradox that exists in the terms, ‘ a grain of Mustard Seed becoming a large Tree.’

Should the reader of the subjoined pages derive any satisfaction from their perusal, and be convinced of the identity existing between *Phytolacca dodecandra* and *ΚΟΚΚΟΝ σιναπεως*, which became ‘ *δενδρον μεγα*,’ the object of the Author will be accomplished.

*Bridge Street, Blackfriars,  
August 1, 1827.*

## REMARKS,

&c.

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NOTHING can be more interesting than the study of the Scriptures; and it is very desirable that the different subjects of Natural History, which are there referred to, should be investigated and explained, as far as our knowledge will permit. Most of them have been accurately described by commentators and able divines, assisted by the philosophers of the times; and it might almost seem incredible that the Mustard tree, or plant which affords the Mustard seed mentioned in the Gospel, should not have been ascertained correctly.



I have consulted the principal authorities of the present day, and have either found the common Mustard seed specified, or else a supposition hazarded, of some other species of *Synapis* than *nigra*, attaining the bulk of a forest tree; but I must confess, that I am not acquainted with any species of *Sinapis* that attains a greater degree of altitude and arborescency, than the common lilac of our gardens, the *branches* of which could not certainly bear large fowls to roost on them, the greater part selecting high trees for that purpose; besides which, this shrubby *Sinapis* (*S. eruroides*) is indigenous to another country.

It has occasionally happened that very false conclusions have been drawn by many able men, from associating incorrect ideas of the nature, habit, and characters of objects of this kind, which were imperfectly known, and of course erroneously described.

I lately saw a beautiful picture, representing a sacred subject, executed by an artist of no mean celebrity or talent; the colouring correct, and com-

position good, as well as the effect of light and shade; but the trees represented in the foreground of the picture were most of them indigenous to Great Britain, and not to Palestine: which glaring incongruity would not have happened, had the artist been acquainted with Botany. Not only does this instance demonstrate the value, but also the necessity of a general acquaintance with all branches of science, and especially subjects of natural history. Let us only examine the strange, unpalmlike plants figured by artists in landscapes of tropical climes, as representing that most magnificent tribe of plants, palms, which so greatly heighten the effect of foreign scenery, and which are familiar to us as emblems of victory: nine out of ten drawings of this description are incorrect. However well skilled the translators of the Scriptures might be in languages, it is very evident they were not so conversant with natural science; and in no instance is this more strikingly displayed than in the manner in which the 19th verse of the 13th chapter of the Gospel by St. Luke is rendered; *δενδρον* being construed for *φυτον*. The seed of an *herbaceous* plant, for such is *Sinapis nigra*, or common Mustard, cannot possibly

produce a *tree*: and however great a degree of altitude and circumference the stem of common Mustard might attain, yet it could not afford support for “fowls of the air,” even allowing it to grow to the height of eight feet, which it seldom or never does.

Mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, as the translation implies, because those of foxglove, (*Digitalis purpurea*,) and tobacco, (*Nicotiana tabacum*,) are infinitely smaller: these are herbaceous, as well as Mustard, (*Sinapis nigra*;) and even granting, for a moment, that the common Mustard seed was intended, the above evidence would annul the validity of the translation. This discordancy has been endeavoured to be reconciled by reference to *S. eruroides*, or shrubby Mustard; but even this has not the smallest seed, and allowing, for the sake of argument, that this shrub could, by luxuriance of soil and climate, increase in height and circumference, and throw off large branches; the size of the seed would remain the same, and the term “smallest of all seeds” would not apply.



The author of a Theological Dictionary has stated, under the article Mustard Seed, that the Mustard tree alluded to in the Gospel was a species of *Sinapis*; and he is induced to assert this, because the figure of the corolla is *cruciform*, which has been assigned to it as an emblem of the cross. This is as vague a conjecture as could possibly be hazarded; for not only is the flower of the genus *Sinapis* cruciform, but also the corollas of a great multitude of plants which constitute the natural order *Cruciatae*; and the author might have fixed on one of a larger stature, had he been acquainted with the other members of that family. He certainly was not aware of the latitude to which the expression he has used was liable, or he would not have made it.

Another author observes, that he saw a Mustard plant so large that it became a great bush, and was higher than the tallest man he had ever seen, and that he had raised it from seed. I can easily conceive this to be true, but I cannot consider it as at all explanatory of the subject, because an *annual* plant, such as *Sinapis nigra*, cannot become even a *shrub*, and much less a *tree*.

Dr. Harris, in his Natural History of the Bible, lately published, has quoted Sir Thomas Browne's opinion in the following words :—After quoting the 31st and 32d verses of the 13th chapter of Matthew, Sir Thomas observes, “ The expression will not seem strange, if we recollect that the Mustard seed, though it be not simply and in itself the smallest of seeds, yet may be very well believed to be the smallest of such as are apt to grow into a ligneous substance, and become a kind of tree. The parable may not ground itself upon generals, or imply any or every grain of Mustard, but point at such a peculiar grain, as from its fertile spirit, and other concurrent advantages, has the success to become arboreous. The expression also, that it might grow into such dimensions that birds might lodge on its branches, may be literally conceived, if we allow the luxuriancy of plants in India above our northern regions.”

I cannot concede this opinion of Sir Thomas Browne's, because I am sure that climate and soil cannot convert an *herbaceous plant* into a *tree*; but I must allow that he has very ingeniously

introduced the idea of a shrubby species of *Sinapis*, producing a seed the smallest of *its* kind.

Having now endeavoured to prove that the Mustard seed of the New Testament is not procured from *Sinapis nigra*, or any species of that genus; I shall proceed to demonstrate the identity that exists between *κοκκον σιναπεως* and *Phytolacca dodecandra*, which is the *δενδρον μεγα* of the Scripture.—*Phytolacca*\* *dodecandra* grows abundantly in Palestine; it has the smallest seed of any *tree*, and attains as great, or even greater altitude than any other in that country, of which it is a native.

Common Mustard is both used for culinary and medicinal purposes; so are several species of *Phytolacca*. It is rather remarkable, that the acridity

\* *Phytolacca*, derived from *φυτον*, a plant, and *lacea*, or *lac*, a gum-resinous exudation, of a red colour. The petioles, or leaf-stalks, of every species of *Phytolacca* which I have seen, have a degree of redness, more or less.—Murray, in his *Apparatus Medicaminum*, in allusion to this, observes, that Port wine was coloured by means of the stems of *P. decandra*.



of the latter induced Linnæus to place that genus in the natural order Piperitæ, whilst De Jussieu referred it to the family Atriplices, which certainly bears out its edible and acrid properties. The North Americans call *Phytolacca decandra*, (commonly known in our gardens by the name of American Poke-weed,) “Wild Mustard.” Murray, in his *Apparatus Medicaminum*, enters into a long history of the esculent quality of the young shoots; but remarks, that when *mature*, they cannot be eaten with impunity. Linnæus, in his *Materia Medica*, refers to the same circumstance. Its being edible, may be implied from the Greek term *λαχανων*, which occurs in the 32d verse of the 13th chapter of St. Matthew,\* and the 32d verse of the 4th chapter of St. Mark’s Gospel.†

\* Ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶ πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων ὅταν δὲ ἀνξηθῇ μείζον τῶν λαχάνων ἐστὶ καὶ γίνεται δένδρον ὥστε ἐλθεῖν τὰ πετεινὰ τῷ ἔρανῳ, καὶ κατασκηνῶν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτῷ.

MATTH. ch. xiii. ver. 32.

† Καὶ ὅταν σπαρῇ, ἀναβαίνει, καὶ γίνεθαι πάντων τῶν λαχανῶν μείζων, καὶ ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους.

MARK, ch. iv. ver. 32.

Mustard seed is applied externally as a stimulant in the form of a sinapism; and the foliage of *Phytolacca decandra* was used as an outward application to cancerous tumors.

Although I have no positive evidence of the young shoots of *Phytolacca dodecandra* being eaten in Palestine, the inference may very fairly be drawn from the circumstance of another species of the same genus, (*P. decandra*,) being used for culinary purposes.

Of the acrid qualities of *Phytolacca dodecandra* there can be no doubt; so that there appears a very strong analogy between the effects and properties of the genera *Sinapis*,\* and *Phytolacca*: besides which, I have ascertained the existence of a fourth ultimate chemical element, *Nitrogen*, in the seed of a species of *Phytolacca*. Nitrogen was said only

\* It may be here proper to remark, that the term *σινάπεως*, or *σινάπι*, in the original language of the New Testament, does not signify any species of the genus we now designate *Sinapis*.

to exist in plants belonging to the natural orders Cruciatae and Fungi, in the former of which the common Mustard, *Sinapis nigra*, is placed.

Not only does this fact shew the intimate connexion that subsists between the genera *Sinapis* and *Phytolacca*, but it demonstrates that nitrogen also exists in the natural order Atriplices.

Having thus briefly stated these circumstances, I shall merely add a few words in conclusion.

That *Phytolacca dodecandra* is, most probably, the tree mentioned in the Gospel, may be proved—

1.

Because it is one of the largest trees indigenous to the country where the observation was made.

2.

Because it has the smallest seed of any *tree* in that country.



## 3.

Because it is both used as a culinary vegetable and medicinal stimulant, which common Mustard is also.

## 4.

Because a species of the same genus is well known in the United States by the term "Wild Mustard."

## 5.

Because the ultimate chemical elements of the seed of *Sinapis nigra* and *Phytolacca dodecandra* are the same.

Trusting that these deductions will meet the approbation of the discerning reader, and set at rest some conflicting opinions on this subject; I am induced to lay this statement before the Clergy and the Public.

For the information of the peruser, I have added the generic characters of *Sinapis* and *Phytolacca*, by which they will be seen, botanically, to be very distinct families: the former belongs to Class 15, Tetradynamia, Order 2, Siliquosa, of Linnæus, and Natural Order Cruciatæ of De Jussieu; the latter, to Class 10, Decandra, Order 5, Decagynia, of Linnæus, and Natural Order Atriplices of De Jussieu.

## SINAPIS.

## GENERIC CHARACTER.

- Calyx*—Perianthium 4 phyllum patens, foliis linearibus, concavo-caniculatis, cruciformi-patentibus, deciduis.
- Corolla*—4 petala, cruciformis. Petala subrotunda, plana patentia, integra, unguibus erectis, linearibus, longitudine vix calycis insidentia. Glandulæ nectariferæ quatuor ovatae, quarum una utrinque inter stamen brevius et pistillum, et una utrinque inter stamina longiora et calycem posita.
- Stamina*—Filamenta sex subulata, erecta, quorum duo opposita longitudine calycis, quatuor vero longina. Antheræ erecto-patentes, acuminatae.
- Pistillum*—Germen teres; stylus longitudine germinis altitudine staminum; stigma capitatum integrum.
- Pericarpium*—Siliqua oblonga, inferné torosa scabra, bilocularis bivalvis, dissepimento valvulis duplo sepius longine, magno compresso.
- Semina*—plura, globosa.

Vide Gen. Pl. Lin.



## PHYTOLACCA.

## GENERIC CHARACTER.

*Calyx*—nullus nisi corollam calycem coloratam dicas.

*Corolla*—Petala quinque subrotunda, concava patentia, apici inflexa persistentia.

*Stamina*—Filamenta decem, subulata longitudine corollæ. Antheræ subrotundæ laterales.

*Pistillum*—Germen orbiculatum, depressum, decem lobis externe divisum, desinens in stylos x brevissimos, patenti-reflexos. Stigmata simplicia persistentia.

*Pericarpium*—Bacca orbiculata, depressa, sulcis decem longitudinalibus excavata pistillis umbilicata, decem loculis instructa.

*Semina*—solitaria, reniformia, glabra.

Vide Gen. Pl. Lin.

FINIS.

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"The view taken of the subject is one to  
"which we seriously recommend the  
"attention of Practitioners - We have  
"already in our own world by most  
"melancholy experience, felt the satis-  
"faction to be derived from it"

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